

Episode 2x09 – He Ain't Heavy

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"What do you mean, I'm doing the job?" Jayne could hear the disbelief in Simon's voice as he walked into the kitchen. "Dammit, Captain, I'm a doctor, not a smuggler."

Jayne smirked at that and dropped down into an empty chair. "You sending Doc to do the next job? Need someone to act sly for you again?"

Simon shot a veiled look at Jayne, before muttering under his breath. "I wasn't the one that went on the date with Edwin and got hit on by a bunch of men."

Jayne growled at him, "You sound jealous, Doc."

"You're an idiot," Simon retorted. "An idiot with a big gun and very little brain matter." He turned to glare at Mal. "And I'm not going to try selling knock-off shoes again, if that's what you're getting at."

Mal raised his hands. "No shoes, I swear it. And it's not a dangerous job – you just need to drop off the goods and get the money. I ain't expecting any problems."

"Then why aren't you doing it yourself?"

"'Cause it's on Whitefall," Mal replied bluntly. "And I'm too recognizable there."

"Whitefall?" Simon repeated. "Weren't you almost killed on Whitefall?"

"A couple of times," Jayne inserted, before glowering at Mal. "Why are we goin' back?"

"Because the pay's good, and we need the money," Mal replied. "'Sides which, Patience isn't involved at all, and I want to keep it that way. She knows me and Zoe, so we can't make the drop. But she don't know Simon. Or you."

Jayne just looked at him. "No way. I ain't doing it."

"Me and Jayne?" Simon looked horrified. "Once was bad enough."

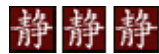
"Neither of you got much say-so in the matter," Mal retorted. "This is my ship and I'm the captain. Ain't no one else on board can do this, unless I send River."

"You leave her out of this," Simon interjected hotly.

"Planning to," Mal replied. "I don't send little girls to do a man's job. Unless the man in question is too worried about getting his lily-white hands dirty..."

"What if something goes wrong, huh?" Jayne interrupted. "Doc couldn't shoot his way out of a paper bag."

"Which is why I'm sending you. Not that you'll need to shoot anyone. I'm telling you, this will be a cake-walk. Ain't no worries. This job is easy-peasy."



"Easy-peasy my muscular ass," Jayne grunted through clenched teeth. "I knew this was gonna be trouble."

"Shut up and keep shooting," Simon yelled. The doctor was armed with one of Jayne's smaller six shooters and was doing his best, but Jayne was pretty sure a blind dog could have been a better shot.

"I'm just sayin'." Jayne swore and ducked as a shot narrowly missed him. "What the hell was Mal thinking, coming back to Whitefall?" Bertha clicked ominously, and Jayne hurriedly reloaded. He never took his eyes off of the number of men slowly creeping closer. His head throbbed in time with his heartbeat, and he had to squint to bring the shooters back into focus.

There were five men that he could see, and Jayne was betting there were another two or three somewhere just out of sight. Probably over on the rocks jutting out across the path. That's where he would be waiting for someone stupid. Like the genius captain of Serenity, or the idiots he sent out for him.

He cursed Mal to the lowest depths of Hell for this one. "Easy money," Jayne muttered to himself in a mocking voice. "It won't be no problem, Jayne. You just take the doc and do the job, Patience don't know neither of you." He snorted and shook his head as another man fell from one of Bertha's shots.

Another shot cracked across the valley, and one of the men grabbed his ankle, howling with pain. Jayne raised his eyebrows. The boy had finally actually hit something besides dirt. The doc was crouched behind an outcropping about five feet away from Jayne. His nice shirt was missing two buttons and he had sweat pouring down his face. If they weren't being shot at, Jayne would be more than a little tickled to see the prissy man so unkempt.

He did have to admit to being kind of impressed at the steady stream of Mandarin the doc was spewing. Some of the phrases Jayne had never heard before. When they

got out of here, he was going to have to ask if the doc would teach him some of the more colorful curses.

If Simon didn't get them both killed first. Jayne almost wished Mal had sent River instead, as he'd threatened to do. At least she was a crack shot.

Jayne had to say, though, the doc's hands weren't shaking, and he didn't look in the slightest bit scared. He did look about fourteen shades of pissed, but seeing as he'd been shang hai'd into this job, same as Jayne was, the merc couldn't blame him.

He still couldn't figure out how Mal had talked the doc into this. Hell, he didn't know how Mal had talked him into it – other than the normal refrain of I'm the captain and what I say goes. Dumbass.

Jayne squinted and recounted. Patience was down to three men that Jayne could see, counting the one rolling around on the ground and crying about his ankle. Doc must have hit the bone and shattered it. Not bad shooting, except Jayne was dead positive Simon hadn't done it on purpose.

Jayne was pretty sure that Patience herself wasn't there anymore. She had taken off as soon as she'd told them her boys were going to kill them, laughing the whole time about getting even with Mal, gloating that he wouldn't even see this coming. The part that bugged Jayne most was that he knew it was true--Mal had been adamant that Patience wouldn't even know Serenity or any of her crew were nearby. Their contact, some hun dan by the name of Knoxy, had assured Mal that Patience wouldn't even know they were on planet.

Obviously, they'd been set up. Patience had nabbed them after they'd made the drop and collected the money. She'd looked pretty damn pleased with herself about it, too. "That Captain of yours ain't too bright," she'd grinned at them as they'd been forced onto the back of her mule. "Maybe loosing his hired thug and his..." she squinted at Simon and leered, "...his whatever-you-are, he'll learn that I'll always have the upper hand. It's a shame though. You're almost too pretty to kill."

And now, here they were. Back in that same gully where they'd been the last time Mal had brought them to this dung-heap planet. Only this time, Jayne wasn't hiding high in the hills, acting as sniper. This time, he was the one getting sniped at and it was pissing him off.

Jayne glowered, shooting the man with the bum ankle in the head just to get him to stop screaming. The noise was throwing off his concentration. Not to mention hurting his head. He scowled again. He wasn't happy that Patience had gotten the jump on the both of them, but truthfully, there was no way he could've gotten himself out of there with ten guys standing there, much less he and the doc. He didn't understand why Patience hadn't just shot them and been done with it. He supposed it was some female-revenge thing; like she wanted to avenge the deaths of her men by killing him and Simon in the same spot her guys had been killed. Whatever, it had been a stupid move on her part. Jayne wasn't prepared to die, and it had been easy to knock out the guy at the back of the mule and push Simon off the moving vehicle before jumping after him. Of course, it didn't mean they were going to survive this, but still...at least they had a shot now. No pun intended.

Simon had come in handy, bandaging up Jayne's head so the blood didn't drip down into his eyes and mess up his aim.

He risked a quick glance sideways, checking to make sure the doc hadn't gotten dead somehow. Simon was trying to reload Annabeth and kept dropping bullets and having to scramble them up out of the dirt.

Jayne frowned. Idiot didn't even know how to load a gun correctly.

There were only two visible left, and Serenity should start noticing that they weren't back sometime within the next hour. Jayne was certain there were at least two other guys he just couldn't see. Probably snipers.

He eyed the remaining men carefully, weighing options. Truth of it was, they only had so much ammo, and most of that was being wasted by shooting rocks and dirt by the doc. Two men left, two he couldn't see, and no decent shots to be had to take them out.

Gorram it. They were gonna have to run for it. Jayne's headache throbbed just thinking about running through the desert from dumbasses with guns.

"Alright, Doc," he said grimly. "Here's the plan."

"Bad plan," Simon said immediately. "We'll get killed."

"You don't even KNOW the plan," Jayne snarled. "Shut up and listen."

Simon sighed, squeezing off another careful shot. And missing.

"And stop wasting ammo," Jayne snapped. He shoved the bloody bandage back up his forehead, trying to think. "We gotta get outta here, and get somewhere where Serenity can find us."

Simon snorted. "Yes, because that will work so well, with us being *outnumbered* and not knowing where the ship is located." He squeezed the trigger again, cursing as Annabeth responded with an empty click.

"Look, you idiot," Jayne snarled. "Mal will kill me if I leave you, but if you come back dead, he won't know it wasn't one of Patience's men. So, let's go."

Simon glared, sweat streaking dirty lines down his face. "Fine, lead on," he snapped.

"Ok. Ok," Jayne nodded, mind racing. "Right. Here's what we're going to do."

Simon's eyebrows rose in astonishment as the merc outlined his plan. "It's suicide," he said flatly. He shook his head, gesturing at the waiting men on the other side of the rocks. "They are waiting for us. If we try to rush them, they will *shoot* us, and we will die." He sounded like he was trying to explain quantum physics to a toddler.

Jayne snarled at the other man. "You got a better idea? Its go out there and die, or stay here and die!" He slammed a new clip into Bertha, glaring at the doctor the whole time.

Simon groaned in frustration. "Fine, we'll try it your way. But if I die, I'll have River kill you with her brain."

"Funny."

On the count of three, they burst out from under their cover, Jayne aiming and shooting on the move. One more of the bad guys fell, clutching his chest with a gasp. One down, one to go. Plus the snipers.

Simon was running straight out for the last remaining man, empty gun clutched in one hand. His eyes were narrowed in concentration.

For a wimp, he could actually run when he thought he was about to die.

Simon took a running leap and knocked the other man to the ground, clobbering him with the butt of the gun he was holding.

Jayne scrambled to his feet as Simon knocked the remaining gunmen unconscious. Both men were panting and sweating as they ran hell for leather past the sniper point.

Two loud cracks rang out, and Simon stumbled. Jayne grabbed the doc's arm and kept going, dragging the smaller man behind him. "Keep running! You stop and we're dead!"

Simon made an odd noise, but staggered on.

They ran until they couldn't hear the shots anymore, before coming to a stumbling halt. Jayne looked at the younger man, noting his pale face and his labored breathing, before his eyes drifted down to where Simon was clutching his leg. His hands were red with blood.

"You hit?" Jayne knew the question was stupid, all things considered, but he didn't know what else to say.

Simon looked at him, eyes glazing in shock. "Safe to assume," he agreed, before collapsing in a heap at Jayne's feet.



"Where the hell are they?" Mal muttered, walking into the cockpit and glaring at Wash. "You heard anything yet?"

"Not a thing," Wash replied. "Maybe they've decided to run off with the goods and escape this life of petty crime."

Mal scowled, but before he could retort Zoe spoke up. "You think something's happened, sir?"

"I don't know," Mal's voice was tense. "They should have been back an hour ago. Gorramit, all they needed to do was find Knoxxy, give him the data sticks, and get the money. What's so hard about that?"

"Things are always more difficult when Simon is involved," River offered softly from her seat in the co-pilot's chair. Her knees were drawn up under her chin, arms wrapped protectively around them. "He is unlucky in love and crime."

Mal rolled his eyes. "You sound like a gorram pessimistic fortune cookie."

"Want me to take the shuttle and go look for them, Captain?"

"Not yet, Zo. Patience knows you—don't want to risk it."

"You're sure she doesn't know Jayne, right?" Wash asked. "I mean, he's sort of hard to miss, what with being so big and ugly and all."

"Don't see how she could," Mal replied. "He's never been visible when we've been here before."

Wash cocked an eyebrow at that, before muttering. "Why is it that he's always visible on the ship, then? Especially when he's eating, or scratching his ass."



Jayne blinked at the man sprawled on the ground for a second, trying to process what had just happened.

Simon was holding his leg, but his hands were shaking. Jayne was amazed that the younger man hadn't passed out yet.

"Jayne," Simon gasped, managing to look irritated and pleading at the same time. "I kind of need some help here."

Jayne hesitated, turning to look back where they had run from. "They're gonna come after us," he stated. "They's gonna catch up." A calculating look stole over his face as he stared at the injured man. "You're gonna slow me down. Why shouldn't I leave you?" His voice was low and threatening.

The doctor glared up at him. "Should I give you the short list, involving my sister and a butcher knife, or the longer list, involving Mal shooting you himself?" Simon's voice was weak, but the sarcasm came through clearly.

Jayne grinned suddenly. "Yeah, probably. Come on, then." Reaching down, he hauled Simon to his feet with one arm. "We gotta find a place to hole up so your leg can be tended to."

The younger man blinked at him, then frowned. "Were you just messing with me?" he asked suspiciously, having to lean heavily on the merc to hobble forward.

Jayne smirked. "That would be telling."

"I hate you."

Jayne tightened his grip on Simon's shirt as the younger man's leg gave out from under him.

"Doc?" The merc lowered the other man to the ground, examining how pale his face was under the sweat and dirt. Simon's head lolled back as Jayne shook him. Jayne slapped the doc's face lightly, but the man didn't even stir.

"Shit."

Jayne scrubbed dirty hands over his face. This damn job started out bad, and just keep getting worse. He nudged the unconscious man with the tip of his boot while he thought. He could leave the doc, easy as breathing. Tell Mal that Simon got shot and couldn't do a thing to help. Bring 'em back for the body, if the ones following left it, as a show of good faith. Ignore the crazy girl's accusing looks and dodge her abilities with a butcher knife. And hope she didn't know how to pick the lock to his bunk and kill him while he slept.

He scowled again. "This is all your fault," he accused the unconscious man. "I ain't sure how just yet, but it must've been you that tipped off Patience that we was with Mal." He squinted back the way they came, searching for telltale signs of people following them. He didn't see any dust trails, so if they were tracking, and he was pretty sure they were, they were doing it on foot. Patience could hold a grudge longer than Jayne's arm that was for sure. And she weren't going to give up on two of Mal's men easy.

Especially not if they were in the middle of the desert with no way of getting back to Serenity til Mal thought to come looking.

Which could be never. Man really couldn't plan worth a damn.

Jayne's attention shifted to the man on the ground in front of him again. With a roll of his eyes, he pulled a large Bowie knife from his boot and sliced the seam of Simon's pant leg from ankle to mid-thigh, just above the nasty looking bullet hole. The Doc's leg was a mess, but it looked like the bullet had gone clean through the meat and not hit bone. That meant nothing if any major arteries had been hit, of course, and from the way the wound was bleeding, that was a definite possibility. With a muttered curse, he leaned over and ripped the doc's vest straight down the front, before slicing the material to ribbons and using the pieces as best he could to tie off the gaping hole. He didn't know if it would do much good, but it was the only option available at the moment.

The doc moaned and lifted a hand to his head while Jayne finished tightening the makeshift tourniquet. "Ow." He opened blurry eyes, looking up at Jayne. "If I'm dead, and you're here, I must be in hell."

"You ain't dead," Jayne informed him shortly, checking the bullet wound with a practiced eye. "But you will be if we don't get back to the ship." Again, he hauled the doc to his feet. "Don't think I'm doing this 'cause I like you or anything," he informed the injured man. "I'm doing this because I want someone who knows what he's doing to be able to take bullets out of me next time I get shot."

Simon wheezed out something that could have been a laugh. "I think, next time, that you should shoot them first."

"Wow, why didn't I think of that?"

"Because you're an ape." Simon was concentrating more on staying on his feet than delivering witty repartee.

"Oh, shut up."

The two made their way in silence for a couple of minutes, Jayne's longer stride hampered by the fact he was half carrying the smaller man, supporting the majority of the Doc's weight.

"Jayne," Simon said, panting with effort and pain. "Next time, let's tell Mal that he can go do the job on Whitefall that he is absolutely positive doesn't involve Patience."

"Next time," the merc grumbled, steadying Simon with one arm. "I'm telling him to go to hell."

"Also a good idea."

They staggered on in silence again, both sweating heavily under the noontime sun.

"Why the hell you so bad with a gun, anyhow?" Jayne asked, more to make sure the other man was still with him than because he actually cared.

"Never learned how to shoot," Simon muttered. "Why would I need to?"

"You never went hunting or camping with your pa?" Curiosity crept into Jayne's voice. He shot a glance at the man beside him.

"No," Simon shook his head in amused denial. "My father is...was a very important man. He didn't have time for camping or hunting." He paused. "Plus, hunting is illegal on Osiris."

"So?"

Simon sighed. "Never mind." They stumbled over a rock, and the younger man stifled a groan of pain. "So, when did you learn to shoot?"

Jayne grunted. "Long time ago."



"Granpa! Granpa! Lookit!" A small boy of about six held up a feebly kicking rabbit by the ears, a proud grin nearly splitting his face in two. "I got him fair and straight, just like you said!"

A big grizzled man squinted down at the boy. "You hit him, but you didn't kill him." The man struck a match against his thumbnail and lit his cigar. He nodded at the rabbit the boy was still holding. "You better wring his neck, quick now. No call letting fear and pain spoil the meat."

The boy looked uncertainly down at the rabbit, then back up at his Grandfather. "You want me to breaks its neck?" He held the injured rabbit further away from him, eyes wide with unease.

"Go on, Jayne," the man ordered impatiently. "You wanna be a man, don't you?"

The little boy nodded and took a deep breath, little hands wrapping carefully around the rabbit's neck. He squeezed and twisted, half cringing away from his own hands. The rabbit kicked unexpectedly as Jayne applied more pressure, startling the boy. He dropped the rabbit in fright, and within seconds the injured rabbit was attempting to escape.

The big man swore around his cigar. "Clumsy boy!" With practiced ease, he brought the shotgun up to his shoulder – aiming and shooting in one smooth motion.

The rabbit fell to the ground.

Jayne looked up at his grandfather with round eyes. "Sorry Granpa," he whispered, looking down at the ground in shame.

Adam Cobb looked down at his forlorn grandson and frowned. "You don't learn to kill, boy, you ain't gonna eat." He fixed the boy with a stern look for a moment, watching the child in front of him fidget unhappily. He sighed, laying a hand on the boy's head affectionately. "Go on and grab that rabbit and show your Ma your first kill."

Jayne's face brightened. "Mine?"

"Yours was the first shot." He let a small smile flicked down at the boy, and patted him on the shoulder. "Next time, you'll do it yourself."

Jayne grabbed the dead rabbit by the ears again, not even flinching this time, and ran off for the house, hollering for his ma.

Adam shook his head in concern. "Better learn quick, boy," he muttered to himself before following the path back to the small farmhouse standing in the clearing.

The boy and his ma were standing on the porch, Ma cheerfully admiring his kill.

"Nice shooting, Jayne baby," she told him with a smile. "You gonna help me cook it up too?"

Jayne nodded enthusiastically. "Can we make stew? With potatoes and carrots?" He hopped excitedly from foot to foot. "Can we have cake for after?"

Janna Cobb smiled at her son's enthusiasm. "Maybe, if we have time to make a cake. Go on and get your brother up from his nap, and we'll get started."

Adam shook his head in disapproval as the boy disappeared inside. "You're making that boy soft," he warned. "He couldn't even wring that rabbit's neck by himself. And you got him cooking and helping with the babies?" He scoffed. "Woman's work. Aint nothing a boy needs to know."

Janna rolled her eyes. "Learning how to cook ain't never done anyone any harm, and he's gonna need it 'til he gets hisself a wife when he's older." She frowned in irritation, "And I don't have to tell you that I ain't never cared what you thought of nothing."

Adam held his hands up defensively, "I know, I know. But it ain't just the cooking, Janna." He shook his head in frustration. "You got him helping you with the baby and making cakes, when he should already be down at the docks with the other boys, running errands for dimes and getting into scrapes."

Janna's eyes flashed. "That boy and his brother are the only two of my children to survive, and you want me to send him out to the docks where just yesterday, Haley's boy got runned over by some idiot who had more horsepower than sense?" She shook her finger in her father in law's face. "I ain't having it. Not my boy. He's gonna do better than this stinking planet. My little boy's gonna be somebody."

"Your little boy's gonna get killed," Adam said grimly, crossing his arms. "He needs to toughen up or this 'verse is gonna chew him up and spit him out. It ain't a pretty world out there. A man's gotta be able to take care of himself. And I ain't gonna let that boy die if I can stop it."

Neither of them saw the small boy in the doorway. Jayne looked down at the cookbook in his hands, before slowly putting it back on the kitchen counter.

He wasn't gonna grow up to be soft. He was gonna be a man.



The crew members were all sitting in the kitchen, not talking to each other and trying to pretend there was nothing wrong, when the WAVE beeped. Since no one was expecting it, they all jumped. Mal rose and approached the small vid-screen in the wall, before sighing and tapping it on impatiently.

"Mal," Patience smirked, her voice sounding tinny as it emitted from the speakers. "Wish I could say it was good to see you, but I kinda hoped you'd be dead by now. Like a couple of your crew members are. I'll give you an hour to try to find the

bodies, but after that won't make any promises. And Mal? You come back here again, I'll get the rest of you."

Before Mal could respond, the older woman had severed the connection.

For a few seconds, no one said anything. The silence was broken by Kaylee's soft moan.

"They can't really be dead, can they?" Wash finally offered. "I mean...Patience didn't even know who they were..."

The pilot's stricken look and words went right to Mal's gut, spurring him to action.

"Gorram *gan ni niang!* Zo', prep the shuttle. We were set up."

"Sir..." Zoe began, "Could be just what she wants."

"I don't care. We're going after them." He turned to glance at River, sitting calm and pale in her chair. He could feel regret churning in his gut like poison. Poor kid. "I'm sorry, River. For what it's worth..."

"They're not dead," she interrupted. "Not yet, anyway. Not ever. Simon promised he'd never leave me alone again." She raised her wide eyes to his and he tried not to flinch at the tears swimming in the corners of them. It was harder to ignore the faith she shone in them when she slid to her feet and smiled that gentle smile of hers. "You'll find them, Captain. I trust you."

Perhaps you shouldn't, he thought to himself, before he turned and walked away. People who trust me have a weird way of ending up dead.



"I spy with my little eye somethin' beginnin' with S." Jayne gave Simon a little shake. "Come on, Doc, I don't got all day."

"Hmm?" Simon raised a groggy head. "What?"

"Gorrammit, we're playin' this *go se* game so you'll stay awake," Jayne griped, stumping along. *Step, drag. Step, drag.* The pain in Jayne's head was throbbing, made worse by the glare of the blazing sun and the constant jarring of his footsteps on the uneven ground. Having to drag the doc's sorry ass along while trying to remember how to spell were not helping matters. "How'm I s'posed to do that when you ain't payin' attention?"

"Gosh, I'm sorry," Simon apologized sarcastically. It would have been more convincing if he hadn't sounded weak as a soda cracker. "Next time I'm dying, I'll be sure to do it when it won't inconvenience you."

"Damn straight you will," Jayne growled. Hefting the smaller man into a better position, he asked again, "So, what do I spy?"

"Begins with an S?"

"Yep."

"Sand."

Jayne smirked. "Nope."

"Simon."

Jayne's face fell. "Gorrammit, you ain't s'posed to get it that fast," he grouched.

"Top three percent, remember?" Simon's head lolled forward. "Besides, there's nothing else in this godforsaken place to see."

"Coulda been *stuck-up son-of-a-bitch*," Jayne muttered.

"I heard that."

They continued on for a few minutes. *Step, drag. Step, drag.*

"So?" Jayne asked, when he couldn't stand the sound of the doctor's raspy breathing one second longer.

"Hmm?" Simon murmured blearily.

"Your turn, dumbass. What do you spy?"

"Mmm, dunno."

"Then open your eyes and look!" He gave the younger man a shake, ignoring his groan of pain. "You're so damn smart, you oughta be able to see a million things 'round here I ain't never gonna guess."

"J."

Jayne frowned. "Huh?"

Simon sighed, head dropping onto Jayne's shoulder. "I spy with my little eye something beginning with J."

Jayne shrugged him off. "Easy," he grunted. "Jayne."

"No."

Jayne frowned. "No?"

"No."

"Then what the hell is it?" When there was no answer, Jayne glanced down at the other man to find him passed out cold. "Gorrammit..."

There wasn't anything even resembling shelter in this arid landscape, but there was a tallish, ugly plant a few yards to the right that was casting a little shade. Jayne made his way toward it until he could drop Simon's limp body on the ground at the foot of the plant. The sudden freedom of movement that came from not having to support the doctor's weight anymore was like a breath of fresh air. Jayne indulged in a stretch, working out the kinks that had formed up and down his back during their hike. He half debated leaving Simon where he'd dumped him and taking off on his own. Without the doctor slowing him down, he had half a shot of getting out of this mess alive.

He sighed. "When the hell'd you turn soft, Cobb?" he muttered to himself, slouching down on the ground next to Simon. He gave the doctor a couple of sharp slaps on the face. "Wake up!"

"I'm awake, I'm awake," Simon groaned, slowly opening pain-crusted eyes.

"You sure?" Jayne slapped him again.

"Yes!" Simon glared at him, hoisting himself up onto his elbows. "You can stop hitting me."

"I know. It's just fun." Grunting, Jayne rolled over onto his back, taking advantage of the minimal shade and trying to rest his eyes from the glaring sun. "You gotta quit passin' out," he told Simon, throwing an arm over his eyes. "Them fella's are still trackin' us, I guarantee we didn't get 'em all. We can't be stoppin' every five minutes so's you can have naptime."

He could feel Simon's eyes boring into him. That was good. If the doc stayed angry, it would keep him awake. "It's not *naptime*," Simon snapped. "It's the body's natural reaction to blood loss coupled with pain."

"I can sympathize on the blood loss, but you gotta work past the pain."

"Work past the pain," Simon deadpanned.

"Yep." The heat of the sun was seeping into Jayne's muscles, making him sleepy. Despite his warning to Simon that they couldn't keep stopping, he was feeling a powerful urge to just fall asleep and let the 'verse sort itself out without him for a while. "Pain's a good thing. Reminds a body it's alive. Keeps you on your toes."

"Keeps you on your toes." Another deadpan.

"Yep. Just like Grandpa taught me."

"Did your grandfather have a medical degree?"

"Nope."

"Any kind of medical training or skill?"

"Fixed up bullet holes a treat."

"Well then you'll excuse me if I don't choose to listen to the demented ramblings of a backcountry sawbones."

Jayne frowned, feeling his weariness drain away. Raising his arm, he glared at Simon. "What'd you call my Grandpa?"

"What, a backcountry sawbones?" Simon asked, glaring right back. "Sorry, does that have too many syllables for you?"

Growling, Jayne rolled up onto his knees, leaning forward until he was nose to nose with the doctor. "You ever insult my Grandpa again, Doc," he snarled, "and I'll kill you."

Simon didn't flinch. "Wait another day or so and you won't have to bother," he snapped. "Because working through the pain or not, that's how much time I've got left." And just like someone blowing out a candle, the fire burnt out in his eyes and he slumped back against the plant.

Jayne glared at him. "Joshua Tree," he growled.

"What?" Simon asked blearily.

Jayne stood up and grabbed the doctor under the arms. "What you spied with your gorram eye," he grunted, hoisting the other man to his feet. "Joshua Tree. Starts with a J." *Step, drag. Step, drag.* "Go again. And make it a hard one this time."



His mouth was sore, and his nose was bleeding and dripping all over his best everyday shirt.

The young boy touched his mouth carefully, wincing at the split lip. He dabbed his shirt tail at it as he limped home. It wasn't like a little bit more blood on his shirt was going to hurt it.

Jayne scowled and then winced at the pull on the corner of his mouth.

Nikolas had cheated, jumping him like that right after school. Jayne kicked at a rock on the path angrily. Nikolas had cheated, and Jayne was the one who ended up getting hit in the face.

Grandpa was going to be mad. Ma would fuss over him and give him ice to put on his face, but the truth of the matter was that he was as big as Nikolas, even though Nik was almost two years older than his ten years. He should have been able to throw him off, easy.

Mattie had run home as soon as he saw Nik start swinging, so there wasn't any way the whole family didn't already know.

Jayne frowned again, careful of his mouth. At least he hadn't cried or anything, not like Cody did when Jayne accidentally on purpose hit him with a willow branch right on the ear.

Jayne almost grinned at the memory. Cody had bled a lot, and his ma had kicked up a big fuss about Jayne being a bully and picking on the others. When he hadn't been. Cody had been calling Jayne stupid, and Jayne wasn't and neither was Mattie. And his ma wasn't a jianhuo, no matter what Cody said his pa said.

He had gotten in big trouble with his own ma for walloping Cody like that, but Grandpa had told Jayne later that he did good by sticking up for his kin, and as far as Jayne was concerned, that was that.

But Nikolas had come up out of nowhere and kicked Jayne hard, right in the head when Jayne was picking up his school books. And then he couldn't see well enough to land a punch on his stupid smirking face. The ground kept moving under him funny.

There wasn't even a reason for it. It wasn't like Jayne had kissed Kelsey on purpose. She had kissed him. Jayne scrubbed at his cheek in irritation. Stupid girl. But Nikolas said that Kelsey was his girl, and that he needed to be keeping his stupid slow self away from her.

Jayne eyed the house coming into view unhappily. And when he saw the big, grizzled man waiting for him on the front porch, his heart sank. Looks like Mattie had made it home alright, and told everyone what had happened.

Jayne slowed his pace, mind racing as he tried to come up with something he could tell his about what happened, without bringing up the fact he lost the fight. Or at least a reason his grandpa would accept about why Jayne lost the fight. If only Nikolas hadn't jumped him all alone. Jayne could've explained away getting beat by three or four of the other boys.

But Mattie had seen the whole thing start before he had taken off running.

Jayne scowled at the ground, kicking another rock, as he went to go face his grandfather.



An hour later, Jayne was hiding out in the upper branches of the tree by the farmhouse. His grandpa had been real mad about Jayne fighting and losing. He had yelled, told Jayne that he wasn't ever going to be a real man if he couldn't even take care of himself in a fight against one other.

Jayne's ma had tried to butt in, finally just throwing Adam out of her house completely until he calmed down.

But when she turned to start fussing over his black eye and split lip, Jayne had run off.

He rested his chin on a branch, wincing a little at the bruise on the bottom. Janna didn't see anything wrong with losing a fight sometimes, she said it happened to everyone, even Pa, sometimes. She had tried to wipe the blood off of his face, but he had shrugged her off and pushed little Mattie out of his way on his way out.

He wished Pa was home. But Pa was out on a job, and wouldn't be back for at least another month.

Jayne swung his legs from his branch, kicking the leaves in front of him. "Gotta stand up for yourself, boy," he muttered, trying to pitch his voice low and gruff like his grandfather's. "Ain't no sissies in the Cobb family!"

He scowled. He was gonna get Nikolas next time. Beat him bloody. He'd show his Grandpa that he wasn't a sissy.



Step, drag. Step, drag.

The sun was about halfway down the sky; Jayne figured they had two, maybe three hours before sunset. He had no ruttin' idea how long they had before Simon gave out, and Jayne's own head was spinning something fierce. Course, he could take it; he'd been in worse situations than this: wandering through a scorching desert, no food, no water, head wound, lugging a half-dead doctor along like rag doll...

"I am so humped," he grumbled.

"We both are," Simon muttered, reminding the mercenary he wasn't alone.

The doctor was slipping downwards, useless leg acting like an anchor. Growling, Jayne hefted him up again. "So, Doc," he grunted as he got the younger man repositioned. "How'm I s'posed to keep you 'wake if yer gonna sulk and ain't gonna play the game?"

"I'm not sulking," Simon argued. "I'm conserving water. Talking uses up valuable fluids." He fought vaguely to stand on his own, then gave up and collapsed against Jayne's side again. "And it's a stupid game anyway. There are only a limited number of words for *sand*."

Jayne snorted. "All righty then, Mr. Top Three Percent, whaddaya wanna do instead?"

"Take a vacation somewhere cool, with someone less smelly."

"Oh hardy-har-har. I'm doin' you a gorram favor here."

Simon gave a humorless laugh. "Oh please. You're only trying to help so my little sister doesn't kill you for letting me die." He put an emphasis on *little*.

Jayne glowered straight ahead. "Ain't scared o' yer sister," he griped. "Little tiny thing..." An image of her with a butcher knife flashed past his eyes, and he quickly blinked it away. "'Sides, I'm more worried 'bout Kaylee. Girl knows how to handle a wrench."

"She'd have to, if she wanted to get through that thick skull of yours."

"Can't say the girl hasn't had practice trying to get through *yours*."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Simon demanded.

Jayne rolled his eyes. "Someday, Doc," he grumbled as they struggled over a particularly rocky rise in the landscape, "yer gonna get outta bed in the mornin', blink yer eyes a few times, look around, and get yerself a gorram clue. But I ain't gonna be the one who gives it to ya."

"I will have you know," Simon protested, wincing as he tried to raise his injured leg, "that the relationship I share with Kaylee is not now, nor has it ever been, any of your business. Besides, it's... complicated."

"How so?" Jayne asked, not really caring all that much but at least it kept his mind occupied.

"It just is."

"Don't see how. She likes you, you like her." Jayne shrugged. "Take her to bed, have yerself some kids. Havin' a few fat little babies runnin' round the ship'd just about blow Mal's top." He smirked, baring his teeth in a gleeful rictus at the thought. "I'd pay good money to see that."

"A smuggling ship housing wanted fugitives is no place to raise children," Simon argued wearily. He was starting to sag again.

Jayne gave him a shake to wake him up. "Yeah?" He had to keep Simon talking or the doctor was going to fall asleep, and judging by how pale he was... Well, it was hard to tell how much blood he'd lost, 'cause the doctor was always too damn pale anyway. "S'pose you think the only place to raise children is in some big ole palace with gates and tea gardens, where a kid ain't even gonna give himself a papercut; and if he does, he's got fifty servants 'round to patch 'im up."

"I come from money, not royalty. And when precisely did you become an expert on childrearing?"

"Come from good stock," Jayne said with a shrug. "Mama raised me right." He glared at the doctor as Simon began to laugh. "What?"

"You kill men for a living!" Simon said with giddy amazement. "And you think that's *right*?"

"I don't kill men for a livin'!" Jayne snapped. "I kill 'em when I have to."

"It's the same thing!"

"Yeah? You think? And when you kill a guy under the knife, what's that?"

"That's completely different." The outburst had obviously sapped Simon's strength; he was leaning even more heavily on Jayne's shoulder now. "I don't do it deliberately. I don't *like* doing it!"

Jayne squinted into the near distance as they picked their way down the opposite side of the rise. "We all gotta make a livin', Doc," he muttered. "Your way, my way, don't matter. We both put men in the ground."

That shut him up, which gave Jayne tremendous satisfaction. His mouth was starting to feel mighty parched, and he didn't fancy wasting spit yammering away with the doctor. Glancing at the sun again, he cursed silently that it had barely moved since the last time he checked. Felt like they'd been walking for hours.

"Twenty questions."

"Huh?" Jayne asked irritably, turning his eyes downward again to focus on the rocky hillocks they were treading across.

"Takes more brainpower than I Spy," Simon explained drowsily. "Keep our brains working."

"My brain's workin' just fine," Jayne muttered.

"Jayne..."

The mercenary rolled his eyes. "Fine, gorrammit," he grumbled. "Animal?"

"No."

"Veg?"

"No."

"Makes it mineral."

"Uh-huh."

They walked a few seconds in silence.

"It's sand again, ain't it?"

"I see you've played this game before."



Patience hadn't expected them to fly a shuttle right through her warehouse. She'd thought Mal would be too busy trying to find the bodies of his men, but obviously, she'd underestimated him again.

She smirked at him when he leveled a very large automatic rifle at her head. "Go ahead and kill me. You won't make it off this planet alive if you do."

"We will if no one knows you're dead," Mal gritted back. "'Sides, you're missing the point here, Patience. I'm not interested in killing you. Never have been. All I want to know is where my men are."

"I'll kill you, though."

Patience almost laughed at the little girl that suddenly appeared beside Mal, carrying a pistol as thick as her wrist. "Recoil on that thing would break your arm, girl. You picking up strays now, Mal? Take that gun away from her before she hurts herself."

"I wouldn't laugh if I were you," Mal replied grimly. "This little girl is a crack shot. She looks frail, but she could kill you before you could blink."

"I'll kill your men first, though," River interrupted. Patience jumped when the girl spun gracefully and shot off two quick rounds, hitting both the men who had been trying to sneak around the side of the shuttle. "Where did you leave them?"

Patience shrugged and tried not to look shocked. "Mal knows where they are. If he thinks about it. Now, either kill me or get out. I don't have time for this. Seems I have men of my own to bury."

"If either of them are really dead, you won't live through the rest of the day." The girl's voice was calm and deadly. She casually pointed the gun she was holding back at Patience, sighting down the barrel at her head.

"Might want to get your affairs in order, Patience. She don't make idle threats." Mal offered quietly as he reached out and grabbed the girl's elbow, pulling her gently back into the shuttle. "If I were you, I'd be praying right about now that your men have been their normally incompetent selves."



"It got spines?"

"No."

"Scales?"

"No."

"Stripes?"

"Yes."

"Huh." Jayne turned the new information over in his head. "So it's animal, bigger'n a breadbox, smaller'n an Alliance cruiser, got a tail, four legs, stripes..." Oddly enough, the game was helping him focus; or rather, it was helping him *not* focus on the ache in his head and the growing cramp in his side. Blinking sweat out of his eyes, he asked, "It a tiger?"

Simon didn't answer. The doctor had been slipping in and out of consciousness for the past hour, and the periods between wakefulness and unconsciousness were getting shorter and shorter. It was also getting harder to wake the younger man up, but Jayne didn't let that stop him.

"Hey!" he barked in Simon's ear. "Wake up! Answer the question!"

"Huh?" Simon looked up blearily. "Wha'..."

"I asked if you was thinkin' 'bout a tiger," Jayne snapped.

"What? Oh... not really, no."

Jayne frowned. "The hell you mean, not really? You was either thinkin' of a tiger or you wasn't."

Simon's eyes closed. "Tiger," he mumbled. "River had a kitten once. Siamese. Named him Tiger because she liked to be contrary." His shoulders shifted as he chuckled quietly. "Such a little brat..."

"Yeah, well, some things never change, huh?" Jayne muttered, hoisting the doctor over a dip in the landscape; it was easier than trying to get the doctor's legs to move. Jayne's shoulder blades were itching at how slow they were moving. Those fellas with the guns were going to be after them still; he didn't trust them to let two wounded targets get away. Any moment now he expected to see the flicker of a laser sight in the corner of his eye, a split second before getting a bullet through the back of his head.

"I was going to be a veterinarian," Simon rambled.

"Yeah? Ain't that fascinatin'," Jayne said, ignoring him to focus on the path ahead.

"Mm-hmm," Simon affirmed with a vague nod of his head. "Till I was seven, I was going to be a veterinarian." He gave an ambiguous wave of his hand, stumbling a little. "Would practice on my stuffed animals. Mom stopped buying me new ones when I did an autopsy on my teddy bear."

"Shiny," Jayne muttered.

"When River was born, I changed my mind," Simon mumbled. "Read everything I could on babies and obstetrics." He chuckled again, sounding more than a little off his rocker. "Some of those pictures... If I'd been older, I'd have gone off sex completely."

Jayne snickered. "Nice."

"Decided I wanted to be a surgeon," the doctor continued, lost in his thoughts. "People... The way people are put together..." He shook his head, as if in amazement. "You wouldn't believe, Jayne. The *intricacy*. Like... like..." He grasped for a simile. "Like a gun," he finally said, probably because he figured Jayne could understand that.

"A gun, huh?" Jayne humored him. If the doctor hadn't been at death's door, Jayne would have almost found his rambling funny. When they got out of this, he was going to have to get the younger man drunk, let him loose. That'd be a riot.

If they got out of this.

"Yeah," Simon said, nodding again as he warmed to his topic. "Yeah, a gun. Bits and pieces that all... *fit*. And because of the way they fit, if one little thing is off, the whole mechanism stops working. It just... shuts down."

"Or backfires," Jayne muttered.

"Yeah," Simon agreed hazily. "Yeah, sometimes it backfires..." His eyes went blank, and Jayne wondered if he was thinking of his sister.

"You still with me, Doc?" Jayne asked, giving the other man a little shake. The sun was lower on the horizon now, painting the landscape a brilliant orange, and it made the doctor's pale skin a sickly shade of yellow.

"Hmmm? Oh." Simon rubbed his eyes. "What... what was I saying?"

"Something about people being guns."

"Yeah... right... guns that work..." The doctor squinted, as if trying to see inside his own head to find the thread of his thoughts.

Jayne concentrated on their footsteps, ignoring the way the ground seemed to spin; ignoring the throbbing ache in his head from where that bullet had grazed him. His mouth felt like sandpaper and his eyes were burning from the struggle of fighting against the sun all afternoon. The cramp in his side from marching this far with no water while keeping Simon upright was starting to become unbearable. Not that he'd let Simon know that; Jayne Cobb wasn't a man who bent easy to any strain.

"I killed my first patient." Jayne blinked, coming out of his thoughts as Simon started talking again. The doctor didn't look like he was particularly paying attention to what he was saying. "He wasn't real," he continued, in that same vague, half-awake tone. "He was a... what's it called... VR. Virtual reality. The whole thing, it *felt* real. Like I was really in the operating theater, nurses around, and the anesthesiologist was wearing really pretty perfume..." He chuckled, but it quickly turned into a sigh. "He was in for heart surgery. VR Man; heart surgery for a blocked artery. And I remember... I remember I was fine until we spread his ribs." He shivered. "It's not like in books. The way things move...."

He slumped completely against Jayne. "I don't feel too good," he mumbled.

"Yeah, well, you look like hell," Jayne agreed. "We ain't stoppin' neither. Not till we find somewhere out of the way." His shoulder blades were itching again.

"Twenty questions. Your turn," Simon muttered as Jayne dragged him along.

"Busy," Jayne grunted. "You go."

"Tell me about the first man you killed?"

Jayne furrowed his brow. "That ain't how the game works, boy."

"I told you mine. You tell me yours."

Jayne sighed in irritation. "Fine," he grumbled. "But just so's you know, all this talk don't mean we're bonding. I'm not gonna start braidin' yer hair at night or nothin'."

"Perish the thought."

Jayne snorted. "Yeah, well, anyway. He was a grunt for some high profile crime boss. Me and my crew at the time, we were s'posed to knock over this boss's vault, steal back some of our employer's hard earned coin. The grunt got in my way, so I shot him." His lips skimmed back from his teeth as he grinned. "Got a nice bonus from that job. Went out and found me some mighty fine trim."

Simon let out a huff of laughter. "You really are an ape," he muttered, sounding more lucid than he had in hours.

"Hey, least I get some, Doc."

"Okay, so how about the first man you saw die. Tell me about that."

Jayne frowned down at the ground. The shadows cast by the setting sun were making it hard to gauge distance and depth. He had to step careful to keep from twisting his ankle on a loose stone. "What makes you think it ain't the same thing?" he asked.

"I realize you're a gun-obsessed freak of nature, but I doubt even *you* killed a man on your first job. You must have seen someone else do it first."

Jayne grunted noncommittally. "Why're you so obsessed with death, huh?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder at the trail they were leaving. Gorrammit, a blind man with no feet could follow that.

"I'm dying," Simon mumbled, voice fading again, his brief period of lucidity gone. "It's kind of on my mind..."

"Shut up," Jayne snapped. "You think I'm gonna let you die, after draggin' your scrawny ass all over hell's half acre?" He threw a glance over his shoulder and frowned. On the purple horizon, back the way they'd come, dust was rising.

Swearing under his breath he tightened his grip on the half-conscious man and tried to ignore the little voice in his head telling him to drop the Doc and make a run for it. "Stow it," he hissed to himself, picking up speed. "Ain't got time for this go se. We've got company."

"They're going to kill us," Simon murmured with a creepy little laugh. "We've been running all day, and they're going to kill us anyway."

"Shut UP," Jayne repeated. "They ain't gonna kill us."

"What are you going to do to stop them?"

"I'll think of somethin'," Jayne muttered.



"Thought you said we'd find them here?" Zoe's voice was stoic as she looked at Mal.

"They should be here. Patience said I knew the place, and this is it."

"I recognize it, sir. But I don't see 'em."

"That's because they left," River announced. She was standing to Mal and Zoe's left, looking critically at a dead man whose brains had been blown out of the back of his head. "Jayne has no finesse," she murmured to herself.

"I count five dead men," Wash called loudly from the Firefly docking bay. "Seems the rumors of Jayne and Simon's demise are highly misleading."

"But where are they now?" Kaylee interrupted. She was standing beside Wash, her eyes puffy from crying. "They been gone all day and this place is a desert."

"We'll find them, mei-mei, don't worry." Inara's voice was calm. "Jayne knows what he's doing."

"But Simon doesn't!" the little mechanic retorted. "Besides, how do we know Jayne won't just leave him behind?"

"'Cause I'd kill him if he did," Mal replied as he climbed up the docking ramp, Zoe behind him. "Come on, River. We'll never find them if we just sit around. They're obviously not here."

He turned when River didn't respond, watching her as she stopped near a gritty puddle of half-dried blood. She leaned over it, her long hair almost trailing in it, before she turned to face him, her face stricken.

"River?"

"It's Simon's," she whispered fiercely. "It's Simon's."

Zoe stepped off the ramp and moved to River's side, gently grabbing her by the elbow and pulling her away. "If he's bleeding, means he's still alive. Come on, River—we won't find him if we stand around here."



The boy under him was yelling and flailing, only occasionally getting in a lucky shot. Bennie's face was all bloody and his nose was broken, but he was still mad and getting madder with every hit Jayne landed.

With a heave, Bennie knocked Jayne off balance enough to roll over, getting his knees under him and cracking Jayne in the eye with a fist.

The other boys surrounding them were yelling encouragement, voices sliding over each other and words disappearing into the noise in Jayne's head.

He couldn't even really remember why they were fighting, except that Bennie had said something about Mattie being too little to be good for anything except being a fink. And then Jayne had made some comments about Bennie's sisters and their line of work, and the next thing Jayne knew, here they were, rolling around on the ground trying to beat the snot out of each other.

His ma was going to be mad about him fighting again, especially with his birthday only two days ago, and his pa depending on him now to take care of things when pa was off working on the rig. Fourteen year olds are considered old enough to make their own decisions, and the first thing Jayne had decided (besides the fact that Kelsey Wheeler was mighty pretty) was that he was done with school.

His Grandpa had laughed, clapping him on the back and wheezing. "Don't need schooling for real life, boy!" he had said.

His ma hadn't been happy.

But, getting in a fight over nothing two days after he called himself a man, well, Jayne was willing to admit it wasn't the brightest thing he had done. But men fight, and right now, he was busy rubbing Bennie's face in the dirt.

When Bennie finally kicked out at him, nearly catching him in the crotch, Jayne staggered back a few steps. He and Bennie blinked at each other.

"I gotta get home to my chores, Jayne," the other boy panted. "Hurry up and fall down already."

"I ain't gonna fall down," Jayne smirked. "I don't fall down, and you don't got the strength to knock me down, neither."

Bennie rolled his eyes, touching the back of his hand to his split lip. "It's getting dark, Jayne," he said. His voice was nearly a whine. "I'm supposed to go over to Julie Beckett's tonight and see her pa about something."

"Well," Jayne said thoughtfully, fists still up in front of him in case Bennie tried anything. "You look like hell."

Bennie glared. "Can we finish this later?"

Jayne shrugged agreeably. "Your ma is still ugly."

Bennie glared and took a step towards him, muttering under his breath, but Jayne just grinned, swiping at the blood on his forehead. Bennie stopped and glared, trying to get himself back under control.

Jayne smirked to himself as he headed back home. It was getting hard to find a decent tussle around town anymore. All the boys anywhere near his age knew what had happened to Nikolas Locke the last time he tried to start something. Jayne puffed his chest out with a little bit of guilty pride. That had been the first time he had sent someone to the hospital in a fight before. There had been a lot of blood.

His ma had been real upset, Jayne remembered. Even though Nikolas had deserved it.

He squinted at the figures in front of his house, trying to figure out why everybody was outside standing around. He could tell his ma, but there was another man standing there, looking like he was helping Janna to her feet. But it wasn't pa or grandpa, and Jayne wasn't sure who else would have come around. The Cobbs didn't have much for visitors, and he didn't think that ma's sister would be over this late in the year.

The man's hand moved on ma's arm, and Jayne realized with alarm that he hadn't been helping her up. He had been keeping her from running. Jayne hustled, sharp eyes studying the man with her. As he got closer, the man started to look a little bit familiar. He looked a little like one of the men who worked on the rig with pa. Some guy named Russell who his pa had told Jayne was one of those hungry men who didn't want to work for their own money. They just wanted everything given to them.

And right now, it looked like one of those things Russell wanted given was Jayne's ma. She slapped him hard, but he was stronger and had her arm bent back at a funny angle.

"Hey!" Jayne yelled, running across the yard towards the two of them. "You let her go!"

Russell laughed as he caught sight of Jayne, rotting teeth flashing. He looked more like a half crazed wolf than a man.

Janna flinched away as he tried to pull her closer again. "Jayne, baby," she ordered. "You stay out of this."

"He's hurting you, Ma." Jayne never took his eyes off of the man in front of him. By the looks of it, Russell was well on his way to being stinking drunk, but he was still on his feet and still a danger.

"I'm fine," she told him shortly, gasping with pain as Russell swung them around to face Jayne fully, Russell pulling out a six shooter and cocking it in one motion.

Jayne tried to stop, a thrill of fear running down his back as the gun swung up to point directly at Jayne's forehead.

Janna moaned. "Please, Mr. Russell, he's just a boy." She tugged on his arm as well as she could and the gun wavered in Russell's hand as he turned his attention towards her. "We don't need to get violent," she pleaded. "I'm sure we can find you something to eat, and then you can be on your way."

"Your husband stole from me," Russell spit. "I ain't leaving 'til I get it back." He leered at Janna, pulling her closer so he could whisper in her ear. "Or something of equal value to me."

She shuddered and Jayne couldn't help it. "You chou wang ba dan," the boy growled at the man in front of him. "Get your hands offa my ma."

Russell brought the gun back up as Jayne stepped forward, pressing it to Jayne's forehead. Jayne was almost mad enough not to care, but he stopped. He couldn't do anything if he got his brains blown out by this sick piece of gou shi. He flinched at the cool feel of the steel, and Russell was pressing so hard he knew the barrel was going to leave a pretty good bruise.

If he got out of this without a hole in his head.

His ma was whimpering in fear, eyes fixed to the gun pressed to her son's head, and she was begging Russell. Jayne couldn't understand the words. He was fixated on the feel of steel and the mocking amusement in Russell's eyes.

"You let that boy go."

The drawling voice made Russell jump, the gun rubbing hard against Jayne's brow bone as Russell's attention shifted to the old man making his way slowly towards them. Adam was grizzled and more stooped than he used to be, but he was still a big man. And he didn't take kindly to people holding guns on his kinfolk.

"Let him go," Adam ordered again. "And get your ugly hands off of my son's wife."

Russell smirked, obviously not seeing the old man as a threat to whatever plan he had. "Why should I?" he asked, tightening his grip on Janna's arm possessively. "Your son is a thief," he spit. "Why should Cobb get a raise, when I'm the one been fired for no reason?" The gun swung away from Jayne for a second to focus on Adam. Jayne took a deep breath, trying to edge away. "No, you don't, boy," Russell ordered without even looking, gun swinging back abruptly. "You try and run and I shoot you."

"Boy ain't worth it." Adam shook his head. "Boy ain't worth wasting the ammo to kill him."

Jayne flinched from his 's words. Adam had always thought Jayne was too soft, too much of a boy to make it as a man. But Jayne thought that now, today, he'd have a chance to prove himself. Show him that he was strong and could take care of things.

But he never got the chance.

Russell laughed, looking over the boy in front of him. "Guess you're right, old man." The gun shifted from Jayne's forehead, dropping and firing in one motion. Jayne grabbed his leg with a shout of pain as he fell to the ground. He could hear Russell laughing, and Jayne opened blurry eyes as another shot rang out.

The world went into slow motion as Adam fell, blood rolling down his face from the hole in his temple.

"No," Jayne choked. "No!"



River was screaming--not just a little scream, either. It was the kind of scream that could melt the wax in a man's ears.

"*Ren ci de shang di!*" Mal exclaimed, jumping from his seat in the cockpit. "What the hell's goin' on? We crashing?"

"Not last I checked!" Wash called back, sticking his fingers in his ears and wincing against the sound.

The girl had been hovering in the cockpit door since they'd got back on Serenity, muttering to herself, while Kaylee stood ineffectually beside her, wringing her hands. Now, River's mouth was distended from the scream. Mal hesitated a moment, then lunged for her, wrapping his arms around her waist and clapping a hand over her mouth. "*Bi zui!*" he barked into her face. She struggled against his hold but he didn't let go. "I've had a bad enough gorram day without you makin' it ten kinds of worse by splittin' my eardrums! Now shut it!"

To his surprise, River stopped screaming and went limp in his arms. "Uh... You done screamin' now?" he asked, because better safe than sorry.

She nodded glumly.

Very carefully, Mal took his hand away from the girl's mouth. When she didn't immediately start going banshee again, he cautiously released her and took a few steps away. She remained slumped in the doorway, looking lost.

"So, you want to explain what that little outburst was about?" Mal asked, leaning against the console as Wash took his fingers from his ears.

River gazed at them, those dark eyes of hers unblinking. "Disappearing," she murmured. "Fading, like the sun."

"You talkin' 'bout your brother?" Mal asked.

"Brother and the bear," she murmured, nodding.

"I tell you what, pretty soon Jayne is going to have the market cornered on big hairy mammal similes," Wash commented. Mal shot him a warning look.

"We're lookin' for 'em now, little witch," Mal responded, turning back to the girl in the hatchway. "Soon as we find any sign of 'em, we'll let you know."

River shook her head, eyes starting to shine a little. "Too late," she whimpered. "Too late, too late, you'll take too *long*!"

With solid footsteps, she strode into the cockpit, stopped directly in front of Mal, and shot an arm out to the side, forcing Wash to sit back in his seat or risk getting punched in the nose.

She was pointing at a point on the navigation screen, staring up into Mal's face.

"We need to go *here*," she told him firmly. Then, to impress her point, she added, "NOW."



The patch of tall grass stuck out like a sore thumb on the bumpy landscape, but it was the nearest thing to cover Jayne could find. Of course that also meant it was the first place the *hun dans* on their tail were going to look when they got here, but hopefully by then Jayne would have some kind of plan for how he was going to kill them, as opposed to vice versa.

Simon had passed out already, loss of blood and the pain in his leg too much to handle. The mercenary unceremoniously dumped the doctor into the grass, where the younger man folded up like a rag doll. Jayne flopped down into the grass as well, trying not to concentrate on how glad his throbbing feet were that they didn't have to keep walking, or how happy his pounding head was that the sun was almost completely below the horizon.

Rolling onto his back with a groan, he stared up at the soft violet sky. Stars were already beginning to shine against their velvety backdrop. As the night got darker they'd get brighter; when he was a kid he used to think that was funny. Everything else got dark, but the stars just got brighter. His mama used to laugh with him about that; called him her bright-eyed boy.

His grandpa put a stop to that right quick.

He snorted. His grandpa had the right of it. Stars weren't something to be excited about; they were little spotlights. He'd killed enough men by starlight to know it was just as good as daylight to the right kind of eyes.

"Guess yer right, Doc," he muttered. "We're gonna die. Bastards are gonna get us, and I don't got one single idea how the hell to stop 'em."

He felt a moment of brilliant, incandescent anger. They shouldn't've ever even *been* on this gorram rock. Patience owned this moon; everyone knew that. Hell, Mal knew that better'n most; but he still went ahead and took the job. Jayne always knew an idiot decision was going to kill him, but he'd always somehow thought it would be his idiot decision that did the trick.

"I die here, Mal," he muttered, "I swear, I'm comin' back and *hauntin'* yer ass."

There didn't seem much else to do now but lie here and wait. He had a little ammo left, so they weren't totally defenseless. They'd be in good shape if the bad guys decided to attack armed with pom-poms and feather pillows.

Simon's breathing was raspy and shallow, and try as he might Jayne couldn't block it out. He didn't really fancy the idea of listening to the younger man die. Sure, he'd been around enough dead people that corpses didn't bother him much; well, not unless they were Reaver-done corpses. He didn't like to think about the Reaver-done corpses. But regular folk who died in regular ways he could handle: bullet holes; stab wounds; hell, old age. Usually he was the one who'd done the killin' in the first place, so he really didn't have much call to be getting skittish. But there was something creepy about watching someone fade away, especially when it wasn't someone who'd particularly done him wrong. In fact, on more than one occasion, Doc had even saved his life. His Grandpa had told him once that once someone saved your life, you owed them and, much as he hated to admit it, he owed Simon. The younger man might be an annoyance--a prissy, prettified, starch-collared, anal-retentive, pain in the ass annoyance--but still... Man hadn't killed him when he'd had the chance that time on Bellerophon, and he knew how to stitch up holes without much of a scar. That kind of skill came in handy in Jayne's line of work. He might not have liked the doctor, but he didn't *hate* him. He even respected him a bit, if the truth be told.

"Least if I die here, I ain't gonna get killed by yer loony sister, Doc," Jayne sighed conversationally. "Don't think my ego could take that; gettin' myself killed by a slip of a crazy girl." He pondered for a few seconds. "Course, I'd be dead, so in that case my ego couldn't give a hump. But my reputation..." He clucked his tongue. "Reputation wouldn't like it one bit."

The violet sky was turning black, stars going from pinpricks of hazy silver to brilliant white. He could hear his grandfather by his ear, telling him to stand up, to face down the enemy. To leave the doctor here and head back into the desert; maybe the bad guys would settle for one head on their mantelpiece. Snap his neck like he should have done with that injured rabbit; end his suffering. After all, weren't like Simon was kin. He was just a whiny rich boy with soft hands; couldn't even load a gun correctly.

Yeah, but that's only 'cause no one's ever taught him, Jayne argued mentally, not sure why he was doing it except that he always liked to argue with someone, and his dead grandfather was as good a person as anyone. *He ain't like me.*

He ain't like me...

Simon moaned suddenly, shifting restlessly on the ground, causing Jayne to break off his internal monologue. "Jayne..." he murmured weakly. "Jayne? Don't leave me here to die alone."

Jayne reached out a large hand and placed it firmly on Simon's shoulder. "I ain't leaving you, boy. We go down, we go down together."

He sat silently for a moment, trying to ignore the sick heat radiating from the younger man; trying to ignore the way Simon's eyes twitched unseeingly in his face. He could almost smell the Doc's fear and wished, for a brief moment, that there was some way he could assuage it.

"You know, Doc, I lied to you," Jayne finally muttered. "Earlier. 'Bout the first man I killed." He shook his head, staring up at the brightening stars. "Weren't like how I told you. I mean, yeah, I killed that fella I mentioned. Dumbass had it coming; walked right in front of my gun, I swear. Obviously didn't have the brains of a really dumb bug. But he weren't my first."

Russell had laughed when Jayne walked up to him in that bar on Paquin; he'd thought it was cute, a little kid coming to get revenge for something done wrong to his family. He'd stopped laughing real quick when Jayne pulled out Lulabelle and pointed her square between the *hun dan's* eyes.

"See, you gotta know this, Doc, or you ain't gonna get nowhere in this black hole 'verse," Jayne continued conversationally, as if they weren't about to die. "When it comes to gettin' things done, there ain't no better motivation than revenge. That's why them bastards've been after us all day; that's why Mal keeps you outta the hands o' the Alliance. Hell, it's half the reason you wanted us to knock over that hospital on Ariel. It's all 'bout revenge. You remember that and you'll go far. You'll still be a pissy little wuss, but least you'll be informed."

Everyone in the bar had watched with some kind of grim fascination. No one thought he was going to do it, pull that trigger. A fifteen-year old boy? Hell, Jayne hadn't been sure he was going to pull it either. He could feel it in the air, the way the tension started to dissipate as the seconds ticked by. Folks started moving, whispering to each other. Russell even *smiled*. Sumbitch *smiled*, like it was all some gorram joke. And in his ear, Jayne remembered hearing, plain as day, *"Boy ain't worth it."*

The click of the cocked hammer was still loud in his ears, to this very day.

"Betcha wish you'd killed me, don'tcha?" he'd said as he pulled the trigger and blown Russell's head off.

He hadn't expected that much blood.

"First man I killed, that was revenge," he muttered, listening to Simon's raspy breathing. "My mama didn't want me to go, but I did it anyway. Boy reaches a certain age, he stops listening to his mother. Starts listening to his hands, and his feet, and other bits of himself that ain't half so polite." He chuckled darkly. "Well I dunno, maybe that's just Rim boys. Cause I got a feelin' you don't listen much to yer pecker, Doc."

He blinked his eyes. God he was tired. The day had been long, and he wasn't as young as he'd been all them years back. "Revenge ain't right, and it ain't wrong, Doc," he muttered. "It just is. And once you've got a taste of it, you can't ever really go back. Things are too small back home. Mama's too frail. You never really find somewhere you fit in, till you find other folks've been in that same place. Then maybe you can scratch yourself out a corner. You know what I mean. You see."

He sighed again. "Don't know why I'm tellin' you this all," he admitted. "Way I figure, man's about to die, he oughta confess his sins. I got too many for now, but this'll do." He shrugged. "Hell, I ain't even sure it's a sin to kill a kinslayer. Man stands by his kin, that's what Grandpa always said. I had to kill the man that killed him—wouldn't have been right if I hadn't. Man stands by his kin."

He glanced at the unconscious doctor again.

"Guess you know 'bout that, too," he muttered.

He turned his eyes back to the sky. "Hell, I'm glad I'm only gonna die the once," he grumbled. "I ain't cut out for all this thinkin'."

Squinting at the sky, he tried to find Regina; but there were too many stars, and they were all fuzzy blobs to his tired eyes. He couldn't tell one from the next. Blackness crept into the corners of his vision as the trials of the day's events finally caught up with him, and the stars faded to black as he slipped away.



When Jayne opened his eyes, he immediately closed them again. "Why the hell's it so bright in here?" he muttered. Taking a sniff, he added, "Heaven ain't s'posed to smell like a hospital."

"I don't know what's funnier 'bout that sentence," he heard Mal's voice say. "The fact that you just complained about it bein' too bright in Heaven, or the fact you think you'd actually make it there."

Jayne growled, but didn't open his eyes. "Take it I ain't dead then?"

"To the dismay of reputable folk everywhere, no."

"Simon?"

"Him neither."

Jayne snorted. "How'd he manage that?"

"On account of havin' a sister who's crazy and more than a little scary when she wants to be. And because someone knows how to tie really tight tourniquets."

Jayne let his eyes open slowly, and found himself flat on his back on one of the Infirmary sickbeds aboard *Serenity*. Mal was leaning against the wall just inside the door, near the window, while Zoe was busy checking the vitals of the room's other occupant. Simon was stretched out on the center bed, looking even paler in the Infirmary's cold blue light than he had on Whitefall's rocky surface. River was perched on a stool beside her brother's bed, a tube running from her arm to his. She had her head propped on his knee, her intense gaze shifting from her brother's face long enough to smile widely at Jayne. Jayne tried to ignore her.

"Ain't givin' the doc his sister's blood a bad idea?" Jayne questioned, annoyed with how hoarse he sounded. "She might infect him with her crazy juice or somethin'."

River stuck her tongue out at him. Jayne returned the gesture.

"Now children, settle down," Zoe said, turning away from Simon's vitals but not looking up as she smoothed the doctor's blanket. "You especially, Jayne."

"Don't see why," he complained, tossing his blankets back and moving to stand up. "I'm fit as a fiddle...duhh..." He winched, grabbing for his head as he slumped back onto the bed.

"Bet that felt real good, didn't it?" Mal asked.

"Shut up, Mal," Jayne grumbled as his head continued spinning.

"Then lie down and do like the nice lady tells you," Mal said firmly. "Near as we can tell you had a little bit of a concussion from when that bullet creased your forehead. And both of you were dehydrated and sun-stroked."

"We wouldn't've been any of that if you hadn't been a dumbass and taken the job in the first place," Jayne muttered, irritated.

"Yeah," River muttered her agreement from her spot at Simon's bedside. Jayne snickered.

"Patience is a one to hold a grudge," Mal agreed testily, sounding annoyed from their joint accusation. "But I don't think she's going to be giving us any more trouble from now on."

Jayne groaned, staring at the captain through heavy-lidded eyes. "Don't tell me you're gonna make us take *another* job on that rock," he argued. "Dammit, Mal, ain't we been shot enough by them people?"

"I'm the captain here, Jayne, and I'm the one who'll say when we've been shot enough!" Pushing away from the wall, Mal crossed the brief distance between them

and leaned over Jayne's bedside, peering into his face like a scientist looking through a microscope at a pinned moth.

Jayne flinched away from the captain's study, frowning. "What?" he demanded. "What is it?"

"Nothin'," Mal said absently, then straightened up. "Just checkin' to make sure you'll live. You will."

"Goody goody," Jayne muttered.

"So'll this one, sir," Zoe said from Simon's bedside. "Matter of fact, he's starting to look better already."

"Thanks to little River here," Mal said, proudly clapping the girl on the back. River gave him a hazy smile. "Oh yeah, that reminds me, Jayne," Mal added, looking over his shoulder at the mercenary. "You owe River your life. She showed us where you were at."

Jayne groaned. "*Wo de ma*, Mal, ain't you got no sympathy?" He tried to glare at River, who was watching him with half-asleep eyes, but found it difficult to focus. "And what took you so gorram long, huh? We was in that desert all day!"

"The girl saved your life, Jayne," Zoe reminded him. "You should say thank you, not grill her like a game of Twenty Questions."

Jayne frowned. "Right. Whatever." He gave River a terse nod. "Thanks."

She nodded back, smiling vaguely. "You're welcome. Thank you for keeping Simon alive."

"You're welcome," he replied gruffly.

"Where am I, and if I'm dead, why do I hurt so much?" Everyone looked up as Simon spoke. The doctor's heavy eyes opened slowly, blinking against the clinical light of the Infirmary. "What happened?" he asked blearily.

"You were severely wounded in a firefight, then made to walk miles across open country in the blazing sun," River chimed in helpfully.

"Ah," Simon croaked, voice hoarse. "Crime."

"How you feelin', Doc?" Mal asked.

"As though I've been hit repeatedly with lead pipes. And woozy. Other than that, fine." He cleared his throat to clear the rasp. "Jayne?"

"Here, Doc," Jayne answered, staring up at the ceiling.

"See you made it too," Simon noted wryly.

"You can't kill me that easy, Doc."

"No, you're rather like a cockroach in that regard."

"You two quit yakkin' and heal up," Mal said firmly. "We've got another job comin' up and I'm gonna need my mercenary. And probably my medic, because we usually do."

Simon gave a weary salute. "Aye aye," he mumbled.

Jayne just grunted.

A few minutes later, once everyone else except River had left, Jayne spoke again, "Doc?"

"Hmm? What?" Simon sounded half asleep.

"What'd you mean, I remind you of a cockroach?"

"You live in a dirty hole in the wall and scuttle when someone turns the light on."

Jayne glared at the doctor. "I was bein' serious," he growled.

"I wasn't?"

"Difficult to get rid of," River interrupted, and Jayne shifted his attention down to her. She was watching him with those big eyes of hers, and it made him uncomfortable.

"And cockroaches are hard to get gone, huh?" he asked gruffly.

River nodded dreamily. "They say that when nuclear holocaust befalls the legions of mankind, the only survivors will be the roaches," she told him.

"So I'm a survivor?"

"Yes."

"Huh."

There was silence for a few more moments, before Simon decided to say something of his own. "I understand all about revenge."

Jayne sighed. Figured the little hun dan wouldn't have the courtesy to forget what Jayne had told him. "You do, do you?" he finally grunted.

"Yes," Simon stated firmly.

"He's talking about me," River added, from her spot at Simon's side. "He'd kill for me, though not a killer."

"Mei-mei..."

"Go to sleep, Simon," she whispered in return. "Don't think about killing—think about being a cockroach, like Jayne. Let's all be survivors."

Jayne looked up at the ceiling, pondering on moon-brain's soft words. Maybe she was right. After all, Jayne'd killed a man in cold blood at the age of fifteen, and he was still alive and kicking all these years later. He was a fighter; a survivor. Once upon a time, back when he'd been his mama's bright-eyed boy, maybe he hadn't been those things. Would he still be alive today if he'd stayed that kid?

Boy ain't worth it. That's what his Grandpa had said.

Huh, he thought, a grim little smile touching his lips. *Maybe I wasn't worth the bullet back then. But gorram it Grandpa, I sure as hell am now.*